

Afterall Books

Ilya Kabakov

*The Man Who Flew
into Space from
his Apartment*

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The Illegitimate Cosmonaut

Utopia will be a long time coming, as we all know, for the construction of the ultimate utopia is a slow historical process that requires the collective effort of generation upon generation. But not everyone can live with that. And one who couldn't was the hero of Ilya Kabakov's installation *The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment*. He didn't want to wait until the whole of the rest of society was ready for utopia; he wanted to head off for utopia there and then — flying out into cosmic space where he would no longer be tied to a particular place, a particular topos, but would be in an *ou-topos*, a 'not-place', weightless, floating free in the cosmic infinitude. So he built an apparatus that was capable of catapulting him straight from his bed into outer space. And the experiment evidently worked — all we see is the room the man used to occupy. The walls of the room are plastered with Soviet posters designed to communicate a sense of historical optimism. Inside the room we see the bed and the remains of the apparatus, along with some technical drawings showing how the apparatus functioned. A section of the ceiling directly above the bed has been destroyed. It was through this hole that the man shot out into space. Visitors cannot enter the room, but they can look into it from a small vestibule outside. On the walls of the vestibule there are texts describing this event from the point of view of the man's neighbours and acquaintances.

The apparatus itself doesn't look particularly impressive. What is left of it doesn't give the impression

previous page

The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment, installation view, Feldman Fine Arts, New York, 1988
Photograph by D. James Dee

that this could have been the same type of rocket used for 'real' voyages into outer space. On the other hand, there was no need for this apparatus to be particularly powerful because its maker had discovered that 'immense vertical currents of energy' pervade the whole of the cosmos. In his view all he needed to do to get to the cosmic utopia was identify the topology of these currents and calculate the precise moment when a person could take advantage of them. So the man set up the equipment in his own room — the experiment was obviously successful because now, after the event, his body is no longer to be seen. And there is only one conclusion to be drawn from the disappearance of the body, namely that this is evidence that the man really was physically transported into outer space, just as the disappearance of Christ's body was regarded as proof that the resurrection really had taken place.

The real scandal is the documentary nature of Kabakov's installation. For this is not just some nocturnal dream; it is not just some mental construct, something abstract, spiritual or immaterial. On the contrary, the hero of the installation was brought up on radical Soviet atheism, dialectic materialism and scientific communism. Dreams and spirits are not enough for him. He only believes in the material, the physical, the real world. He doesn't pray. And he doesn't dream. Instead he constructs a device that he has designed himself on the basis of specific scientific principles, and uses it to launch himself, body and soul, into outer space. The only thing that distinguishes this undertaking from a strictly scientific experiment is the supreme

importance of the right moment. The positive sciences regard time as homogeneous, which by definition means that any experiment is capable of being repeated. The hero of the installation, on the other hand, has to identify the exact moment when certain, otherwise dormant, cosmic energies enter a period of activity. This is the type of science pursued by revolutionaries and artists — it's a matter of not missing the right moment, of allowing it to propel one into the unknown. It's a matter of recognising and making specific use of nameless energies that have a cosmic and a collective effect, but which generally go unrecognised. And, as it turned out, not so very long after the making of this installation (1985 in Moscow) Ilya Kabakov was himself bodily propelled over the borders of the Soviet realm towards the West, in much the same way that his hero hurtled into outer space. And in 1988 the same energy flows even swept the installation to New York where it was shown for the first time (see figs.1—8 and 14).¹ As it happened the appearance of these energies — deemed impossible by the political scientists of the time — was just as unexpected as that of the cosmic energies discovered by Kabakov's hero. And let us not forget: for someone like Kabakov to make it to the West in those days was at least as difficult as becoming a cosmonaut.

But the cosmic energies that the hero of the installation wanted to turn to his advantage are the same energies that the Soviet space programme had benefited from earlier. For these were the utopian energies that gripped a technically backward nation and took it into space. For a time in the Soviet Union space exploration was

the mainstay of official propaganda. Cosmonauts were glorified and celebrated like few others in the land. After Yuri Gagarin became the first man in space in 1961, the country looked up into the sky with a different sense of pride. And maybe it was this very enthusiasm for space exploration that led to something like complicity between the Soviet state and its people. Space travel reactivated the utopia that once gave birth to Soviet power. Suddenly people felt a new innate kinship between their own dreams and longings and the giant utopia of a global, cosmic, communist society — a kinship that had long seemed to be a thing of the past. It is precisely this kinship that is first and foremost the focus of Kabakov's installation. The man's room is filled with Soviet posters, designed and executed according to the conventional, official aesthetic of that time. Even the picture painted by one of the man's friends that also has a place in the room obeys the same aesthetic. It portrays a moment of collective ecstasy, of jubilation and triumph, the sort of thing — we assume — that every artist secretly dreams of, for every artist wants to be fêted. But these images of ecstasy are not enough. Each person wants to experience that ecstasy for him or herself, even if alone. And that's when it seems to the artist — for we are dealing here with an artist, as in the case of all of Kabakov's other installations — that this flight into the cosmos could be a last chance to reconcile individual and collective ecstasies, to realise a collective dream alone and in private. After all, although the cosmonaut is alone as he orbits the earth, he knows that he embodies the collective dream. And above all he knows that he didn't

get there through his own strength alone but by virtue of the energy of these collective dreams, aptly symbolised by the rocket that delivered him to that place where he is now solitarily in orbit.

It is no different for the artist. He will never manage to launch himself into the art world entirely under his own steam. And just when the artist finds himself completely on his own, he is most startlingly impelled forward by nameless, collective energies. So you could say that the hero of Kabakov's installation was able to fly out of his room because he had accumulated the energy inherent in the posters, which in turn tap into the collective energy of the Soviet people — those same posters in the empty room that looks similarly empty and abandoned now that he has gone. Without having been inspired and buoyed as he was by the collective, communist ecstasy, he would still be lying there in bed. His own night-time dreams would never have been able to catapult him out into the cosmos.

All the same, the hero of this installation did not appropriate and channel this energy in the same way that a proper cosmonaut would have done. He wasn't appointed by either the state or society to serve as an embodiment of the collective dream and to orbit the earth on behalf of his fellow citizens, representing society as a whole. No, the artist is an illegitimate cosmonaut. He appropriates, privatises and deploys global utopian energies entirely for his own ends, without previously having been selected and authorised by society. So the room left behind by Kabakov's hero

looks more like a crime scene than a laboratory where a genius has been at work. For this is where the dream of a global, cosmic, communist future has been purloined under the cover of darkness, privatised and misused for one person's private, lonely ecstasy. Which is why the hero of the installation receives no public acclaim. His disappearance is met with public silence — there are very few people who want to remember him.

It was a one-way flight. There will be no public resurrection. This flight was all about escaping.

The cosmonaut has become an *émigré*. But is it really right to talk of 'misuse' here? Well, yes and no. For we have to ask ourselves, when exactly and by whom was the cosmic utopia originally betrayed? There is reason enough to suggest that this utopia was originally misused by Soviet society, which in this case means the Soviet state. We all know that in the Soviet Union space exploration was developed primarily with a view to its possible military uses. Added to which the idea of space exploration was relentlessly milked for propaganda purposes, and images of the Soviet cosmonaut orbiting the earth were endlessly reproduced in the media, regardless of the fact that, without an official permit, which was all but impossible to negotiate, the ordinary Soviet citizen had no chance of crossing the borders of the Soviet Union. So the official Soviet cult of space exploration could be seen as a blatant misuse of the cosmic utopia of unlimited free movement. The dream of unconstrained flight, of weightlessness, of the ecstasy that can overcome

any gravitational pull was barely recognisable in the ideological excess of the parades, rituals and ceremonies mounted by the Soviet powers.

So, you could say that by his personal misuse of the collective cosmic dream Kabakov's hero has liberated it from its misappropriation by the ideological apparatus of the Soviets. The hero's utopian project may be individual and private, but it is in no sense of secondary importance or in-authentic. On the contrary: this individual re-appropriation frees the original utopian energy of the cosmic dream from imprisonment in a particular political and technological system. Leaving behind its empty, ideological and technological shell, the cosmic dream re-establishes its own essence and establishes, *post factum*, its authenticity, because the essence of a dream is the very fact that its essence is not fixed, it has no definite form and it is not institutionalised. For it is only longings, desires and indefinable wishes that can be genuinely collective. And in that sense, Kabakov is following in the footsteps of the Russian avant-garde by focusing on these desires. Even the act of emigration, leaving Soviet society behind, is not presented as a betrayal of that society but as something nurtured by the same utopian energies that originally led to the birth of this society. For the Soviet, the communist project was originally a global, cosmic project, which was only territorialised and brought to a halt by the constraints of the Cold War. Which is why the desire to cross borders, to overcome constraints, can still be regarded as an expression of that original utopia.

Kabakov's installation breathes new life into the utopian potential not only of communist ideology but also — and most importantly — of the Russian avant-garde, with its own close links to communism. In the early years of the twentieth century, the figure of the aviator had the same fascination for the international avant-garde — particularly for the Russian and Italian Futurists — as the figure of the cosmonaut was to have for Kabakov's generation. An important aspect of the aviator's appeal was his isolation high up in the sky, with the result that the fascination of air travel waned as soon as it became accessible to the masses. True to type, Tatlin expressed this widespread fascination when he created his *Letatlin* — an extremely archaic-looking contraption which was meant to fly powered solely by the pilot's own muscle strength, with no additional motors of any kind. At first sight it looks like an aberration of sorts, because *de facto* the *Letatlin* could not fly.² But on closer examination, it demonstrates the extent to which the aeronautics industry had misused and betrayed the dream of flying: it was not the human being but the machine that had been given wings. Specifically because of its archaic form, the *Letatlin* evoked that ancient, primal human desire to be able to fly, which has nothing to do with technological feasibility and which makes even the most modern aircrafts look like empty shells. Kabakov's hero is a new Tatlin — an avant-gardist long after the days of the avant-garde who dreams the dream of the avant-garde one last time in the seclusion of his own room. But he doesn't just dream, passively registering it as something impossible — and his work is in no sense

nostalgic. On the contrary, he realises the dream of the avant-garde for he successfully flies up into the cosmos — and, as we have said, not just in his dreams or in his imagination, but bodily, in material, physical terms.

Significantly, the Russian title of the installation uses the word for 'cosmos' where the English title uses the word 'space', suggesting that the man has not flown away into a void of sorts, but into the 'cosmos'. Ever since the ancient Greeks, the word 'cosmos' has had connotations of somewhere beyond this earth — not a spiritual but a material otherworld. Particularly in the Russian philosophical tradition the notion of the cosmos is used as a cipher for the corporeality and materiality of the world. And in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russia, there was an increasingly explicit interest in the cosmos as a topic in philosophy and art, a time when people were starting to dream of a bodily immortality to replace the merely spiritual, immaterial immortality of the soul. This radical new scientific atheism was regarded not as a rejection of Christian belief, but as the next final step that would render Christian belief superfluous. The idea was to obviate the need for Christianity by realising the Christian promise here in this world, materially, physically and scientifically, instead of just denouncing it as unbelievable. The notion of the cosmos was used as a term to designate a new environment, where new human beings with their new, immortal bodies would be able to find a new home.



KASSE INFORMATION

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This was why black cosmic space had such a fascination for the early Russian avant-garde. Malevich's famous *Black Square*, in the first instance was a picture of the open, black cosmos. People dreamed of overcoming the earth's gravitational field, radically shaking off that pull which not only keeps human beings pressed to the earth's surface but which also ultimately sees them under a layer of earth. This went hand-in-hand with the desire to escape the gravitational field of the ancients, tradition and civilisation, to leave the pull of the old world, to float free in a state of weightlessness — not just mentally, spiritually, in one's imagination, but bodily, in actual physical terms. It was not just the soul that was to be freed from its earthly burden to flee into a luminescent other world, but the body, too, was to leave behind the earth's gravitational field and disappear into the black of the cosmos — just as Kabakov's hero does. Many leading figures in the Russian avant-garde — Malevich, Chlebnikov, Tatlin — shared this dream of flying through the cosmos, alone and weightless. And they were powerfully inspired in this respect by certain Russian philosophers of the day. The most interesting of these was Nikolai Fedorov, who drew together the problematics of cosmic life, physical immortality, communist society, technology, art and the museum (figs.12–13). Fedorov's thinking is thus very relevant to Kabakov's installation, particularly since his ideas made something of a comeback in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 70s. So it is worth looking more closely at these ideas.

The 'philosophy of the common task' which Fedorov developed at the end of the nineteenth century found little popular recognition during his lifetime but did have a number of illustrious supporters such as Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Vladimir Solovyev, who were each intrigued and influenced by his thinking.³ After his death in 1903, his work became increasingly well known, although mainly amongst Russian readers. In brief, the philosophy of the common task consists of the creation of technological, social and political conditions whereby it would be possible to bring back to life — by artificial, technological means — everyone who has ever lived. Fedorov viewed this 'project' as a continuation of the Christian promise of the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. Only Fedorov did not believe in the immortality of the soul after the demise of the body — or at least a 'bloodless', 'abstract' immortality of that sort was not enough for him. Nor was Fedorov content to wait, passively, for the second coming of Christ. Despite his somewhat archaic language, Fedorov was very much a child of his time, a product of the late-nineteenth century. In his eyes, the only possible form of existence is physical and material. And he was an equally firm believer in technology — because everything is material, corporeal, everything is do-able, open to technological manipulation. But above all he believed in the power of social organisation — in that sense he was a socialist through and through. For Fedorov, immortality was a matter of coming up with the correct technology and the right social organisation. In his view people simply had to decide to commit to the artificial resurrection of the

dead. Once they had set themselves this aim, the means would present themselves of their own accord, as it were.

So the responsibility for immortality shifts from God to society — or maybe even the regime. Fedorov takes very seriously the promise made by the emergent 'biopower' (and, as such, by the state) to value life for its own sake — and demands that the powers-that-be think their promise through to the end and live up to it. In so doing, Fedorov is reacting in the first instance to an inherent contradiction in nineteenth-century socialist attitudes, which disturbed him and other authors, notably Dostoyevsky. Socialism promised full social justice. But socialism linked this promise with its belief in progress in such a way as to imply that it was only future generations — living in a more highly developed, socialist society — who would reap the full benefit of social justice. Meanwhile, past and present generations are cast in the role of passive victims of progress — there will never be justice for them. So future generations will enjoy social justice at the cost of a cynical acceptance of an outrageous historical injustice — the exclusion of all past generations from socialist, or communist, society. Socialism thus exploits the dead for the sake of the living — and exploits those alive now for the sake of those yet to come. This means that the only chance for socialism to create a just society at some point in the future is to work towards the artificial resurrection of all those generations that have laid the foundations for its success. The resurrected generations then would

be able to play their own part in socialism — and there would be an end to the discrimination perpetrated against the dead for the benefit of the living. Fully-fledged socialism needed to establish itself not only in space but also in time, to which end it would use the latest technology to turn time into eternity.

This in itself is closely linked to the techniques developed in art museums to preserve the bodies of works of art for an unspecified length of time. As Fedorov rightly remarks, the mere existence of the museum is at odds with the broadly utilitarian, pragmatic spirit of the nineteenth century.⁴ The fact that things die and decay in the museum is not acceptable in the same way that it is 'in life'. Progress means that old things are constantly being replaced by new things. In that sense, the museum is, by definition, opposed to progress for it is a place dedicated to the immortality of things. But since the human being is just one body amongst other bodies, a thing amongst other things, it can also have a share in the immortality that is nurtured in the museum. For Fedorov, immortality is not a paradise for human souls but a museum for living, human bodies. Thus the Christian notion of immortality is replaced by the museum-led immortality of things, of bodies. Accordingly, God is replaced by the museum curator, and divine grace by the curator's decisions. In Fedorov's eyes, art is not about taste and aesthetics, for these have more to do with design and fashion. For Fedorov the main technique in art is the technique concerned with preserving and reinvigorating the past. In art there is

no progress. Art is not waiting for a better, future society — art immortalises the here and now.

To quote the famous formulation by Michel Foucault, the modern state is defined by its power ‘to “make” live and “let” die’ — in contrast to the old-style sovereign state that does precisely the opposite, making die and letting live.⁵ The modern state is constantly concerned with birth rates, the health of its population and its basic needs — all recorded as statistical values. In that sense the modern state, in Foucault’s view, is primarily a biopower, which justifies its existence by ensuring the survival of the human masses, the human species. Admittedly, this does not guarantee the survival of the individual. As Foucault sees it, the modern state respects the individual’s boundaries and doesn’t interfere in the private realms of natural death. Nor is this boundary questioned by Foucault himself. Characteristically, Foucault regards the space within the museum — where time accumulates and things are no longer finite — as ‘an other space’, a heterotopia.⁶ But Fedorov’s project, and that of the Russian avant-garde, was to unify the museum space and the spaces where we live — turning them into a total cosmic realm of corporeal immortality. And with this unification of the two types of space, biopower develops its own infinitude: it becomes the organised technology of eternal life, refusing to accept individual deaths and unwilling to tolerate dying as its own ‘natural’ limitation.

Fedorov proposed, amongst other things, that a ‘museum space’ should be created for every person

who had ever dwelt on this earth. Along with his or her mortal remains, it would contain all the traces of their earthly existence in anticipation of the time when the new technology of artificial resurrection would be able to make use of these items as the dead were brought back to life and sent out into the cosmos. Consequently, the museum installation becomes a launch pad of sorts, from where the resurrected ones can be catapulted into their new cosmic lives, with the work of art paving the way for the resurrection of the human body and its transformation into a free-flying cosmic body. And Kabakov’s installation, remembering the man who flew out into the cosmos, looks exactly like just such a Fedorovian launch pad for cosmic bodies — albeit after the cosmic flight has taken place. This in itself points to a notable difference between Kabakov’s installation and the most famous of all Soviet installations, the Mausoleum on Red Square in Moscow, inside of which Lenin’s corpse awaits its resurrection. For neither has Lenin’s corpse disappeared nor has it flown out into the cosmos — it’s still lying there, still waiting to depart.

As it happens, immediately after the October Revolution the political demand that individual immortality should be the state’s highest aim was voiced by the Biocosmists-Immortalists, a grouping within the anarchist movement with which Malevich was closely associated. In one of their manifestoes the leaders of the Biocosmists made the following declaration: ‘We view as essential and real human rights man’s right to existence (immortality, resurrection, rejuvenation) and

to freedom of movement in the cosmic realms (as opposed to the supposed rights proclaimed in the declaration of the bourgeois revolution of 1789).⁷ In fact Alexander Svyatogor, who was one of the leading Biocosmist theorists, regarded immortality as both the aim and the crucial precondition for any future communist society since, in his view, true social solidarity can only exist amongst those who are immortal — for death separates people. Private ‘property’ cannot be eradicated completely so long as each person still has their own private portion of time. In eternity, on the other hand, there will be an end to the conflicts between the individual and society that cannot be resolved ‘in time’. The striving for immortality is every individual’s highest aim — thus the individual will always remain faithful to society if that society makes this aim its own. At the same time, the communist society of immortals should also be ‘interplanetary’; in other words: it should occupy the entire cosmos.⁸ In Svyatogor’s opinion, people would have faith in a future communist society only if each individual also believed that there would be a place for them in this future society. Otherwise the future is just a place where those living today are no longer present — and in that sense, not a utopia of any kind.

It is perhaps not without interest to note in passing that the Soviet space programme has its real roots in the Biocosmist movement. The programme’s founder was Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (fig. 14), a great utopian who believed in the possibility of the artificial, tech-

nology-led resurrection of the dead. And the first vehicle he designed to voyage through outer space was intended to transport the resurrected dead to other planets where they could settle.

At the same time, Tsiolkovsky believed that those processes, which occur in the cosmos as a whole, and those other processes, which exist within the human imagination, are one and the same. For Tsiolkovsky the human brain was merely a material component of the universe. Hence, in his eyes, the human being — internally, in his or her mind — is directly driven by cosmic energies. What we ‘subjectively’ experience as thought is ‘objectively’ the product of cosmic energies — which is precisely why we can rely on our own thought processes.

And this is exactly how Kabakov’s hero thinks and acts. Nevertheless, we should not forget that it is not Kabakov echoing the attitudes of Tsiolkovsky and Tatlin, it is the hero of his installation. Kabakov is not a modern-day Tatlin — he merely documents his protagonist’s attempt to realise for himself the dream of flight. Far from identifying with the protagonist’s yearnings, the artist — more like a detective — turns his attention to the material traces of the man’s disappearance in order to discover what has happened. Thus Kabakov’s relationship to his ‘hero’ is ambivalent in the extreme. He shares his protagonist’s utopia even as he distances himself from it. In fact this ambivalence is present consistently in Kabakov’s work as a whole. As a rule he doesn’t work under his own name; instead he makes

up names of fictional artists — alter egos and *doppelgängers*. This allows him to establish a certain distance to these *doppelgänger*s and, hence, to his own work.

He documents his work and he takes on the role of historian, curator or editor — but he never appears as the 'authentic' author of his own output. In the 1970s he was already making his albums — books with loose pages containing stories, told in words and pictures, of dreamers and visionaries, unknown and unremembered, who were never understood by their peers. In his later installations Kabakov continues to tell the stories of lonely dreamers who never made it in the world but who chose to emigrate, leaving the world behind them. Flying is frequently used as a cipher representing the inner freedom of these heroes — but also for the ultimate disappearance of their bodily forms, which leaves the question of their death forever open, unanswerable. His very first album, *Primakov-Sitting-in-a-Closet*, and the album *The Flying Kormorov* (both 1972), already celebrate free flight into another world, with the bodies of the flyers vanishing once and for all. However, the albums and installations on this theme are always realised by Kabakov in a markedly neutral, purely documentary style. He gives every appearance of positioning himself not as a utopian but solely as an objective, unbiased observer.

But appearances can be deceptive. Of course it would be true to say that in his own documentary, narrative practice as a maker of installations, Kabakov doesn't invoke unseen, cosmic energies but — unlike his heroes — steadily maintains an enlightened, sceptical

attitude. Each time he tells the story anew, however, it is not just a concrete account of the realisation of a concrete personal utopia delivered by an outsider.

For Kabakov takes his place in a long-standing tradition of utopian narrative — and is very well aware of this. The fact is that utopias as such can only be made accessible to others through just such a utopian narrative. Even the original utopia, the invention of Thomas More, was presented in this way, visited by an observer from elsewhere and described from a neutral, objective point of view. Any narrative describing a utopia is by definition a utopian narrative. Describing or documenting a utopia means creating that utopia. And anyone who embarks on a utopian narrative cannot help but feel that they are heir to all the utopian projects and narratives of the past.

So in his installation Kabakov uses images of Red Square and other symbols of the communist, Soviet utopia in order to tell the story of the individual, private fate of the hero of the installation. The great utopian narrative describing how all of humanity would one day be collectively propelled out of the gravitational pull of oppression and misery and into the cosmos of a new, free, weightless life has often enough been dismissed as *passé*, old-hat, a thing of the past. Yet stories of personal, private dreams and of individual attempts to realise these dreams cannot be told other than with recourse to that good old collective utopian narrative. Which is why Kabakov — not only in this case but also in almost all of his installations — uses images and texts from the era of Soviet propaganda,

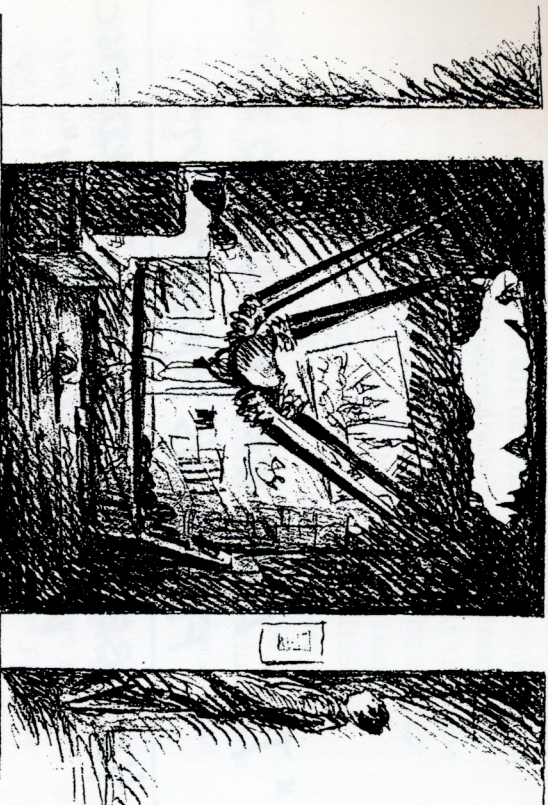
which still have great utopian potential. One of the declared aims of Soviet communism — a global project — was the liberation of all of humanity. But the attempt to realise this project ultimately led to the creation of an extremely repressive regional power. At the same time any criticism of this power and even the attempt to flee its jurisdiction could only have been inspired by the emancipatory project and global ambitions instigated by that same power. Moreover, there were and still are no other 'languages' that could be used to tell the story of personal liberation other than those which the collective utopian narrative has always had to offer.

The appropriation of images used in Soviet propaganda that we see in Kabakov's installations appears at first sight to have something in common with the practice amongst Western artists — since pop art if not before — of appropriating mass-produced consumer goods and images from the world of advertising. The similarity cannot be denied. But there is a significant difference in the type of appropriation. The images and items that Kabakov deploys in his installations are not consumer goods, nor are they images from commercial advertising that circulate in the capitalist market. Using freely circulating materials in an art context means extracting them from their usual commercial context and presenting them as icons of the world of consumerism. Thus the viewer's attention is redirected from the consumerist function of these images and items to their formal make-up and appearance, for they are presented as fully autonomous art objects detached

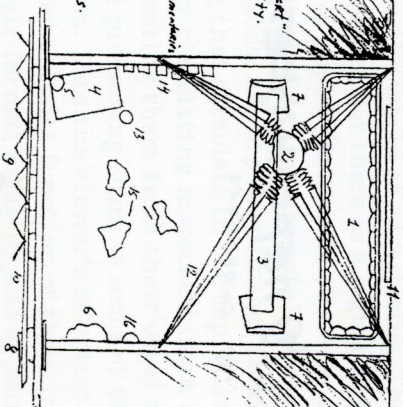
"THE MAN, WHO FLEW INTO SPACE
FROM HIS APARTMENT"
ЧЕЛОВЕК, УЛЕТЕВШИЙ В КОСМОС
ИЗ СВОЕЙ КОМНАТЫ

/ ИЗ "10 ПЕРСОНАЖЕЙ" /
FROM "10 CHARACTERS"

1988



- 1 Folding bed.
- 2 canopy.
- 3 board for the shelf.
- 4 mosaic of the city.
- 5 Lamp.
- 6 Rinkoat.
- 7 chairs.
- 8 explanation.
- 9 shelf with the command.
- 10 boards.
- 11 painting.
- 12 Ruler's board.
- 13 tea pot.
- 14 sketches, plans.
- 15 newspapers.
- 16 hood.



- 1 - ymka, packing
- 2 - kashanyak
- 3 - goela gis (my)
- 4 - shag, paper
- 5 - shag
- 6 - shag
- 7 - shag
- 8 - shag
- 9 - shag
- 10 - shag
- 11 - shag
- 12 - shag
- 13 - shag
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- 15 - shag
- 16 - shag

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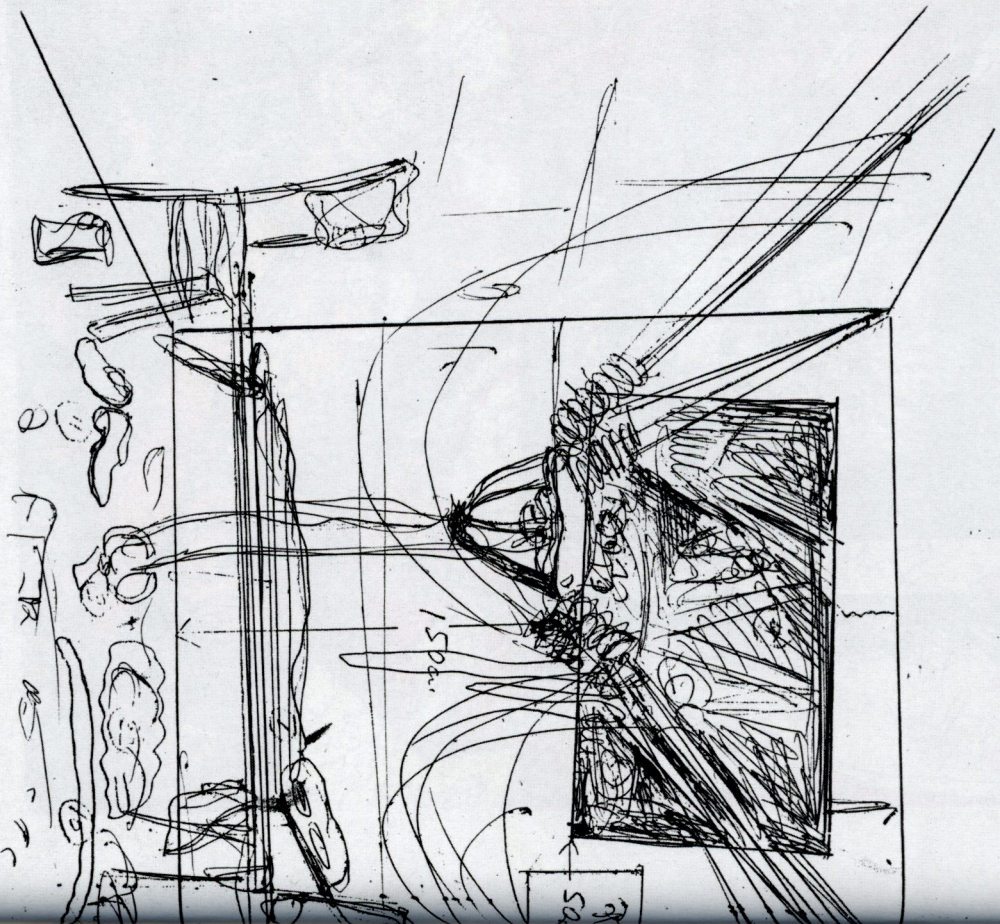
2. The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment, sketch for '10 Characters', 1988



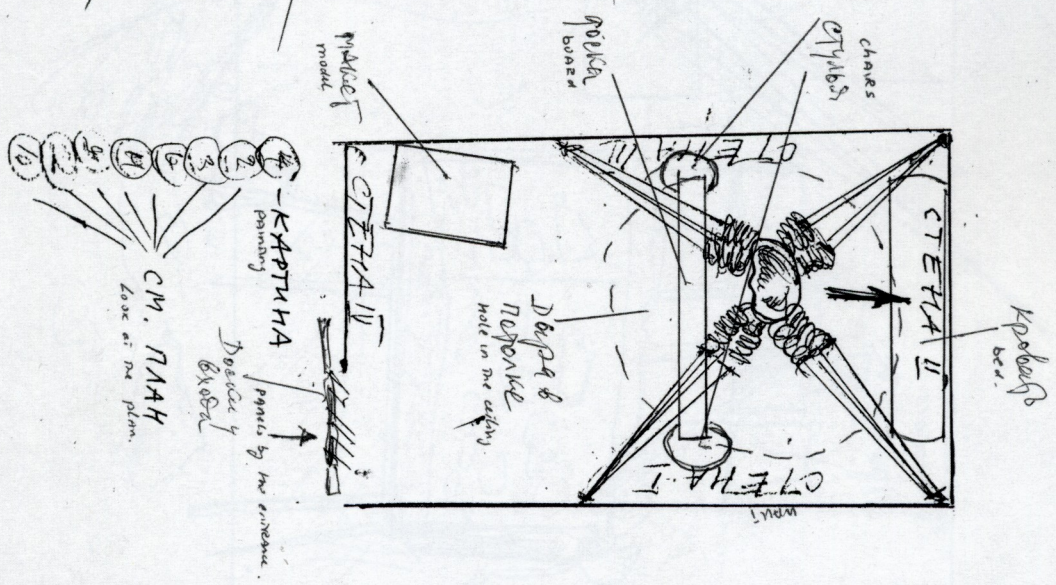
3. The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment, sketch for '10 Characters', 1988

СТЕНА II

Wall II

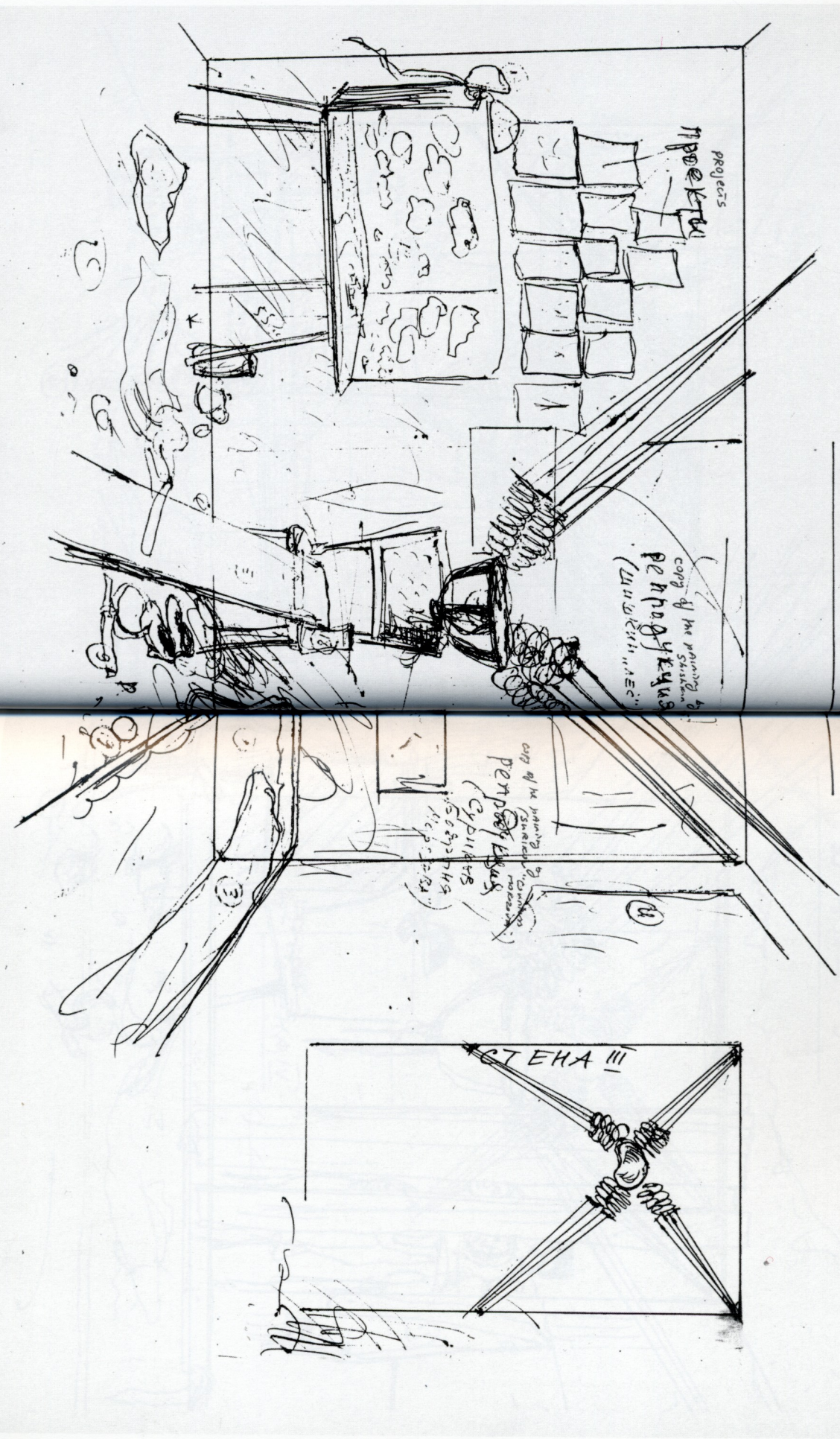


ПЕРВОДІК 409
copy of the painting

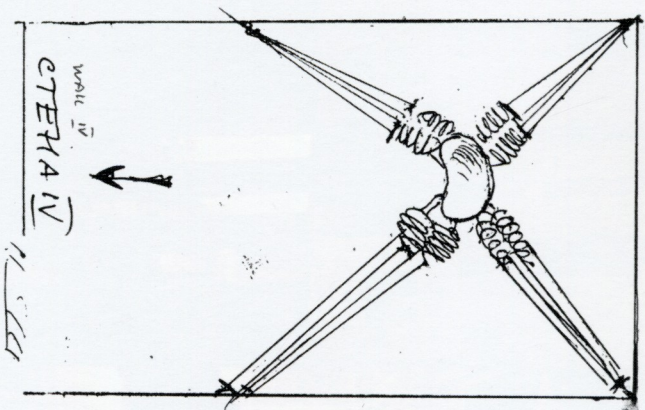
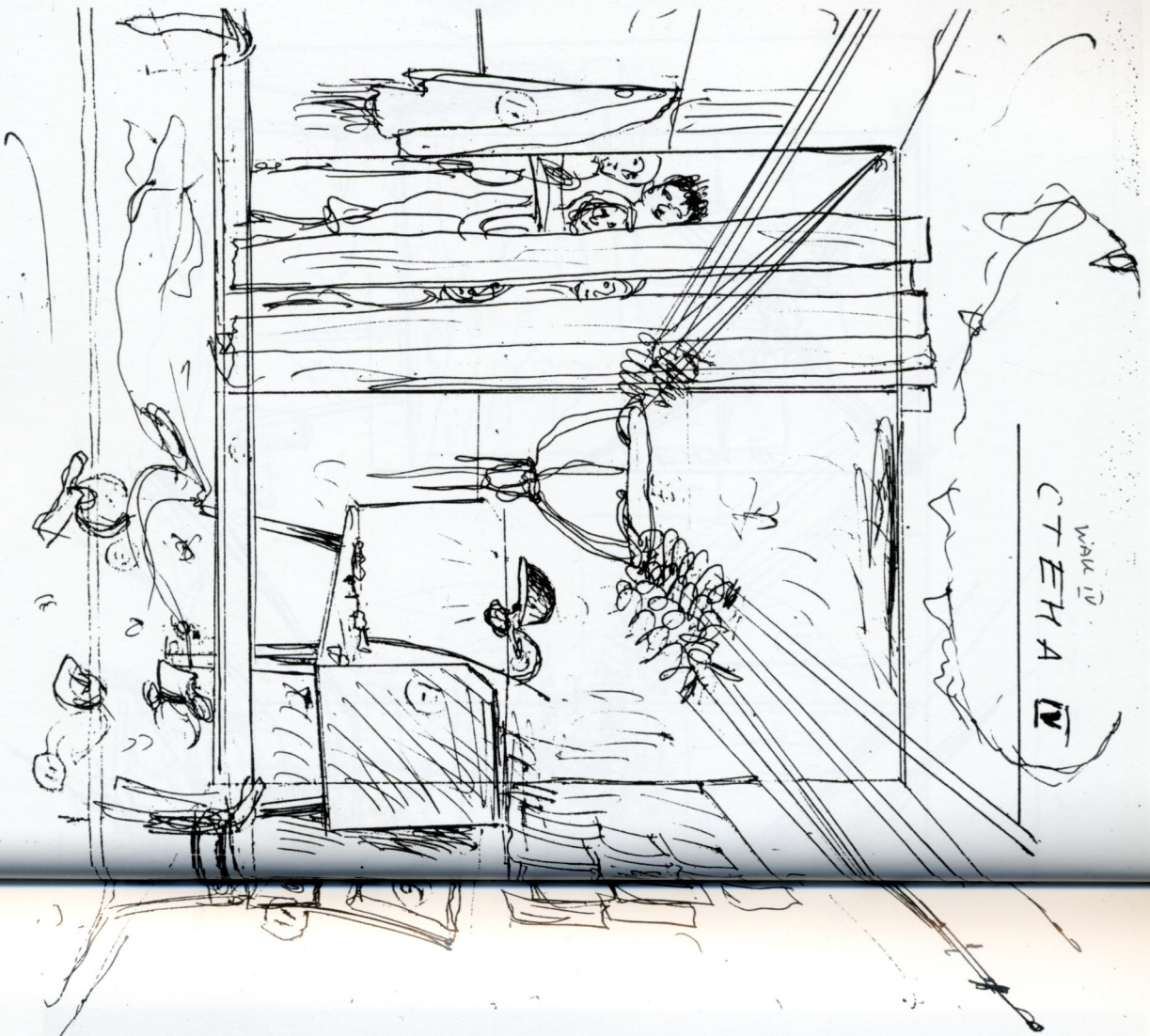


4. The Man Who Flew into
Space from his Apartment,
sketch for '10 Characters',
1988

СТЕЧА



5. The Man Who Flew into
Space from his Apartment,
sketch for '10 Characters',
1988





7. *The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment*, installation view, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1997
Photograph by Emilia Kabakov

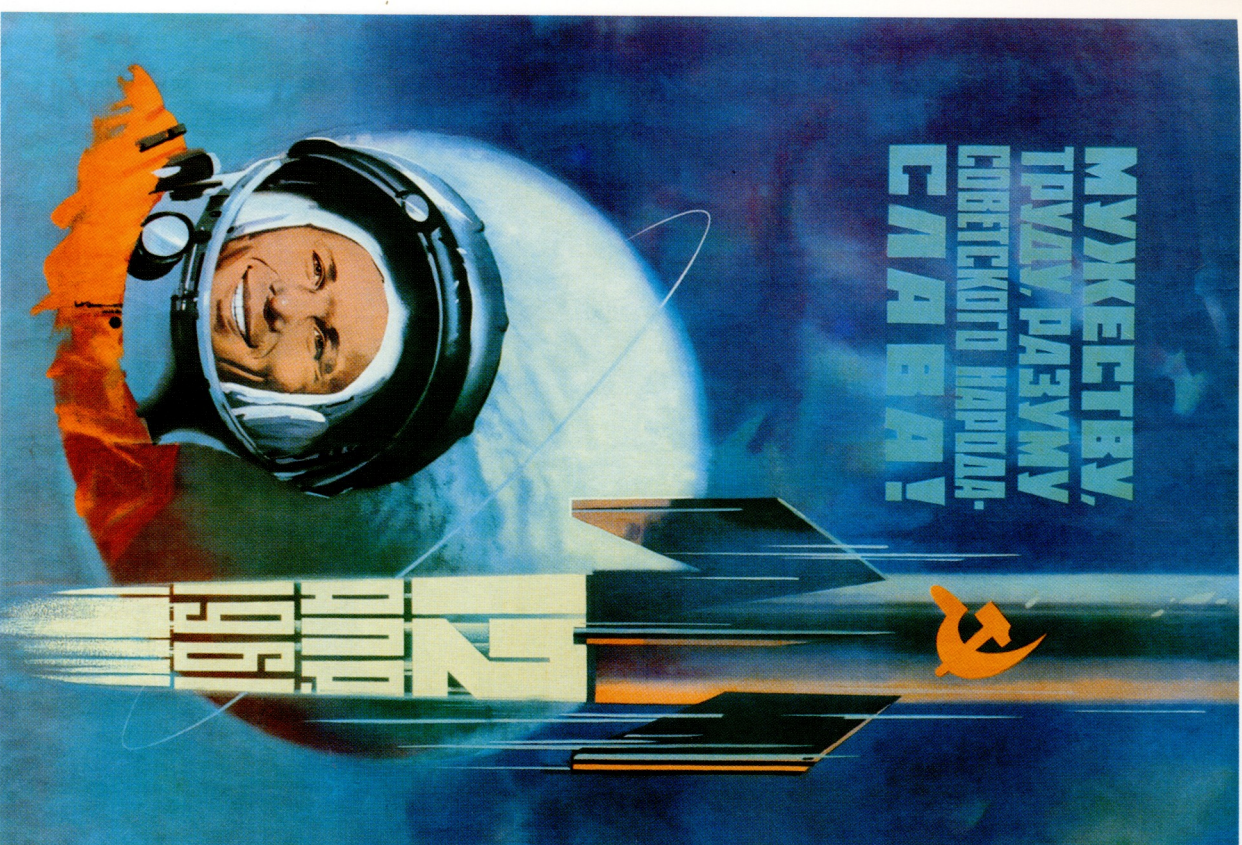


8. *The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment*, installation view, Feldman Fine Arts, New York, 1968
 Photograph by D. James Dee



ИХ ВЫВЕЛ НА ТРАССУ НАРОД-ИСПОЛНИ,
СОЗДАТЕЛЬ БЕСЦЕННЫХ СОКРОВИЩ,
И ВСТАЛИ, НАН ВИТЯЗИ НОВЫХ БЫЛИН,
ГАГАРИН, ТИТОВ, НИКОЛАЕВ, ПОПОВИЧ.

9. N.I. Pil'shchikov, poster
(The people-giant, the creator of the
invaluable treasures sent them on their
way as heroes of new legends — Gagarin,
Titov, Nikolaev, Popovich), 108x70cm,
Moscow: Voenizdat, 1962



**МУЖЕСТВУ,
ТРУДУ, ПАВУМУ
СОВЕТСКОГО НАРОДА-
СНАВАУ!**

10. Valentin Petrovich Viktorov, poster
(Glory to the courage, labour and reason
of the Soviet people! 12 April 1961),
84x58cm, Moscow: Izgiz, 1962



11. *The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment*, installation view, Feldman Fine Arts, New York, 1988
Photograph by D. James Dee

from the context of their commercial use. This mode of presentation can be read as both a critique and an apotheosis of the prevailing fetishism for consumer goods. They can be seen as both a tool to be used in the critical analysis of the market and an extreme manifestation of the 'society of spectacle'. But leaving aside these contradictory interpretations, one thing is certain: in the time-honoured tradition of modernism the consumerist item, which in any case circulates on its own, is presented as an even lonelier, autonomous work of art.

In the Soviet Union there was no marketplace. Soviet 'things' were never commercial, they were always utopian. Their value was not their soul but their capacity to point to what was not yet there but which would possibly be there at a later date. These were not icons of consumerism, but signs of the coming liberation from any kind of marketplace. Or to put it another way, these were not so much commercial objects as words and phrases in a utopian narrative. All Soviet images and things were originally about narration and illustration, in that their prime function was to demonstrate the progressive realisation of the utopian communist project, and only after that were they intended to satisfy the present need of the population living here and now. So the only way to appropriate these images and items on an artistic level is to incorporate them in a different, in this case individual, private narrative. And that is exactly what Kabakov does when he tells of the private utopia of his hero using the same means that were constantly deployed

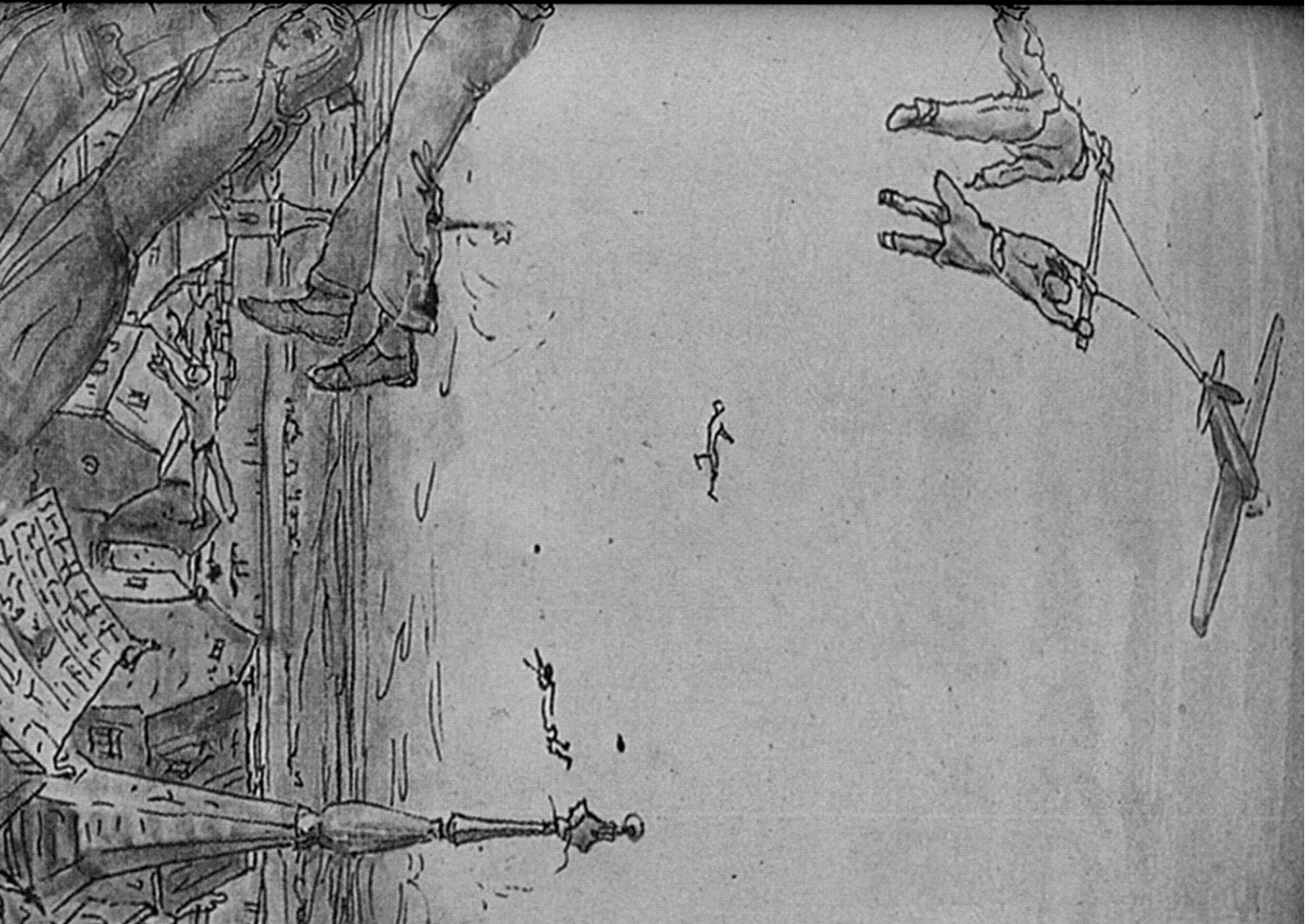
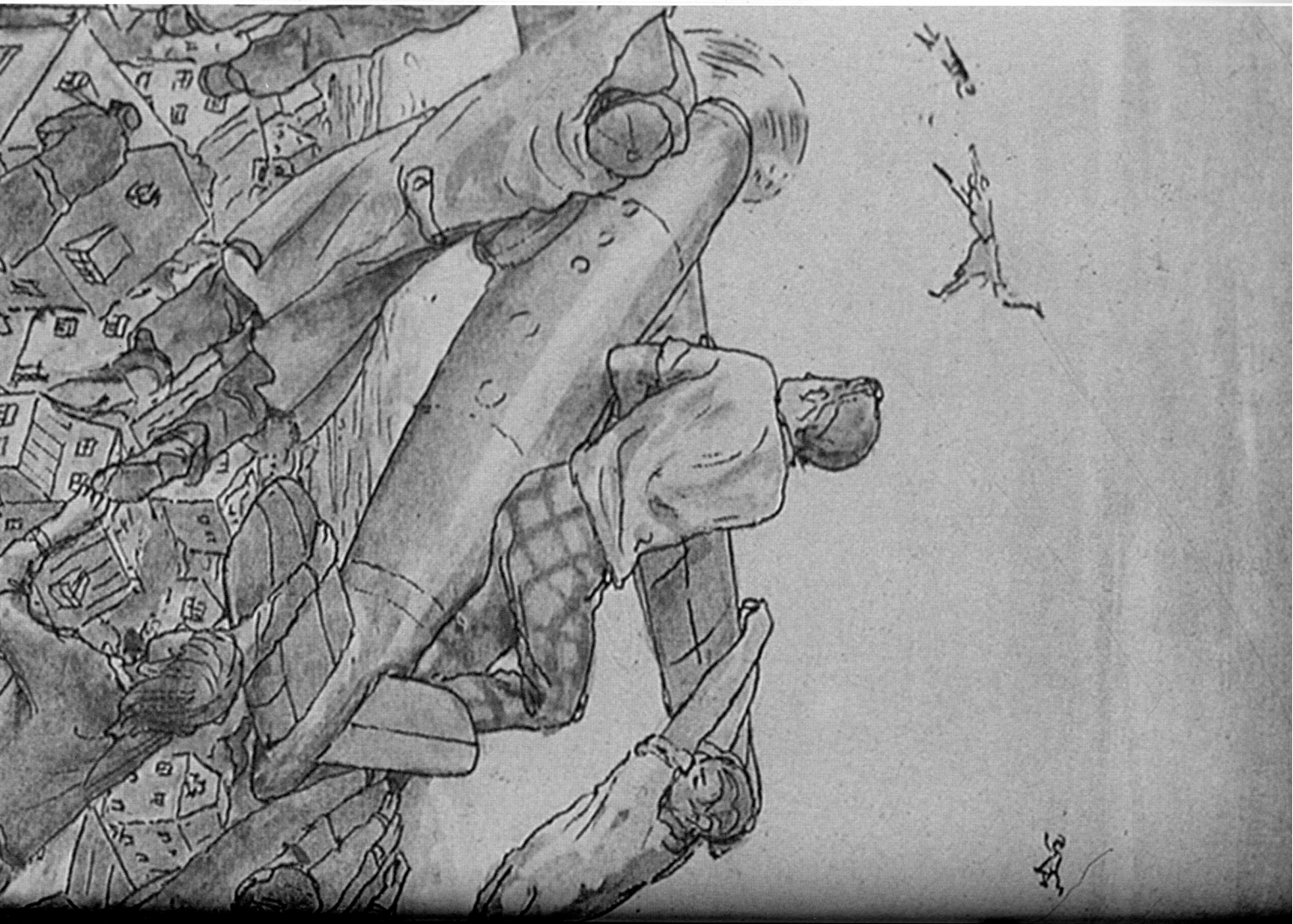
to tell the increasingly propaganda-weary Soviet people of the great Soviet utopia.

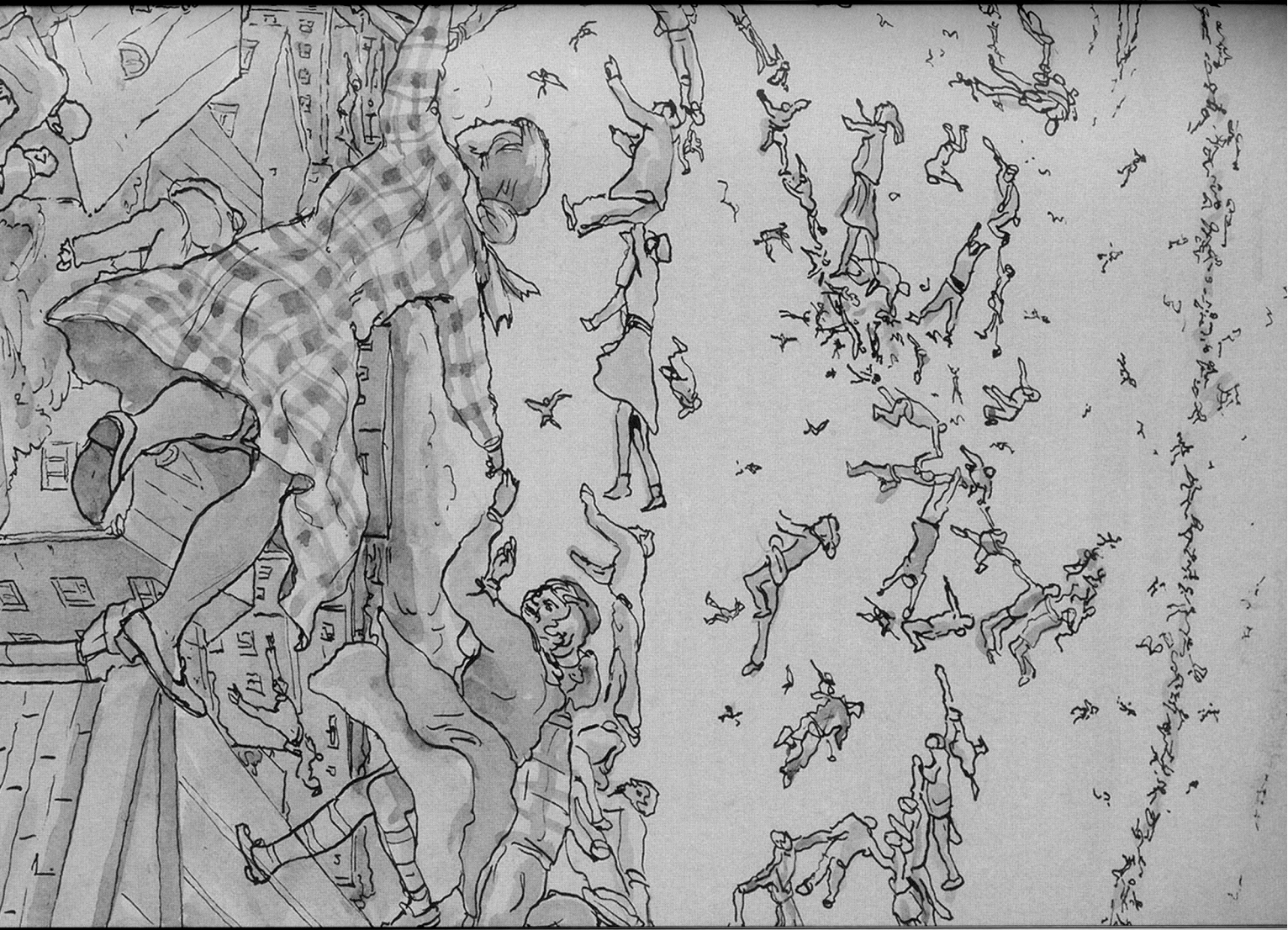
Kabakov's art is emphatically narrative-driven and illustrative, and as such is distinctly different from the majority of Western art today. In the minds of Western modernists the image has to speak for itself; the silent contemplation of the image should be enough to persuade the viewer of its value. Theoretical and narrative musings on the qualities of the image had to stop. The best commentary on an image seems to be silence, or a text that sounds like silence. The artists of the classical avant-garde saw the eradication of the literary components of art as their highest aim. Only when narrative content, stories and illustration had been eliminated from a picture could that picture be regarded as genuinely modern. But precisely that kind of picture — the kind that speaks only for itself — is nothing other than an icon of the world of consumerism. When the narrative framework of a picture is removed such that the picture becomes fully autonomous, the meaning of that picture becomes wholly indeterminate — it stands as a sign for nothing and everything. And, as such, it becomes a consumer item in its own right, and we see that the boundaries of Western consumerism also demarcate a culture that values and admires a fully autonomous, isolated picture.

In Orhan Pamuk's novel *My Name is Red* (2001) a group of artists try to find a place for art in sixteenth-century, Turkish-Islamic society. The artists are book illustrators who, on orders from above, create

the finest of miniatures to embellish books that will later find a home in state and private collections. The books tell all sorts of stories — stories of conquest, defeat, love and war. Already having to contend with radical Islamist and iconoclastic opponents of their trade who want to banish images *per se*, the illustrators also increasingly find themselves up against Western culture — predominantly incipient Venetian capitalism — and Renaissance artists, who are aggressively promoting and flaunting the 'autonomy' of the picture. But the heroes of the novel cannot share this enthusiasm for they do not believe in the autonomous power of the picture. They set about finding a way of continuing to practice the art of illustration — even despite the rise of autonomous art in the West. As it turns out, it is the Turkish Sultan who points the way forward for them — and whose theories are still relevant to art today. In the Sultan's opinion:

*An illustration that does not complement a story, in the end, will become but a false idol. Since we cannot possibly believe in the absent story, we will naturally begin to believe in the picture itself. This would be no different than the worship of the idols in the Kaaba that went on before Our Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, had destroyed them.... If I believed, heaven forbid, the way these infidels do, that the Prophet Jesus was also the Lord God himself... only then might I accept the depiction of mankind in full detail and exhibit such images. You do understand that, eventually, we would then unthinkingly begin worshipping any picture that is hung on the wall, don't you?*⁹





During the Soviet era Kabakov's main source of income was from his work as an illustrator – above all for children's books. In his books he was forever retelling the story of a private, childlike utopia that was itself part of the great, socialist utopia. Many of the artists he was friendly with at the time also worked as illustrators. Actually, the whole circle of Moscow Conceptualists in the 1970s – including Kabakov – consisted of artists and poets who wanted to make a narrative connection between words and images. This in part accounted for the distinct differences between the practice of the Moscow Conceptualists and the Western conceptual art of the day. The Moscow Conceptualists didn't want to be reiterating that irksome question, what is art? Instead they wanted to relativise the autonomous artistic value of the picture, to question the picture as such by the way they incorporated it into various narratives and used it for the purposes of illustration. For the Moscow Conceptualists found the picture interesting specifically in its non-autonomous, non-artistic use. Far from doing away with the picture's illustrative properties they explicitly wanted to highlight these. This type of strategy, not unrelated to the Sultan's advice, is seen again in Kabakov's later installations, which are always narrative, always documentary, thereby providing the artist with a way of avoiding simply hanging a picture on a wall where it could turn into a new idol.

But by the 1970s and 80s, long before the final break-up of the Soviet Union, the official Soviet narrative was already looking increasingly weak, unable to prevent

the autonomisation and commodification of the picture because that narrative had lost its collective credibility and validity. As a result, many artists set about privatising the social utopia and creating their own private utopian narratives. Just as the demise of the socialist state left behind a huge swathe of the economy for private individuals to take over, so, too, following the concurrent abandonment of the communist ideology, was a huge empire of collective feelings released into the hands of private individuals. Before this, in the 1970s, people had already started to develop something of an allergic reaction to the 'dissident pose' that went hand-in-hand with the notion of looking behind the façade of Soviet ideology in order to uncover its grubby, hidden truth. Instead there was a move to try to open people's eyes to the fact of that façade by taking it seriously and analysing it. Of course in the Soviet Union of that period, any such analysis looked disrespectful in the extreme and even shocking – not only to official cultural circles but also to their unofficial cultural colleagues.

The art of the Moscow Conceptualists – including Kabakov, who had undertaken just such an analysis – was regarded by the Soviet ideological establishment as particularly anti-Soviet, notwithstanding the fact that in unofficial art circles it was generally derided as far too politicised and far too fixated on all things Soviet. So within the Soviet Union the Moscow Conceptualists were largely isolated in cultural terms. And they were also isolated on the international stage, despite the fact that their art practice was

very much influenced by the different trends of the time in Western art — from pop art to conceptual art. The fact is that Moscow Conceptualism was an unexpected cultural innovation and very much an exception during the days of the Cold War when people in the East and the West alike believed they had to be either for or against communism. Added to which matters of taste, sensual appeal and artistic quality — which were so important in the mass-culture of the West with its orientation towards commercial art and advertising — played a distinctly subordinate part in the Soviet culture of the day. The success or failure of a work of art was dependent less on its visual appearance than on the artist's ability to establish, by whatever means, the ideological legitimacy of the work. So the characteristic struggle against the conventional criteria, which focused on artistic quality and had largely defined the dynamics of Western art in recent decades, was not particularly relevant to the artist in the Soviet Union. All the more important to the Soviet artist was the ideological interpretation of his or her art, which almost to the exclusion of everything else would decide the fate of the work.

However, it has to be said that within the circle of Moscow Conceptualists, with whom he was in the closest contact in the 1970s and 80s, Kabakov occupied his own special position. He does not appear to believe that the circumstances of any art, including those of Soviet art, can be described objectively, nor does he accept that it is possible for art to make a picture of the conditions of its own functioning because any such

picture is by definition doomed to be just one picture amongst many. It is a common assumption today that it is the task of critical art to throw as objective a light as possible on the conditions of the economic, political and institutional production and distribution of art, but Kabakov does not seem convinced that it is possible to deliver a positive, sociological description of this sort. For art, in his eyes, is much more about the chance to change existing circumstances, or at least to escape them. But most importantly, the circumstances of Soviet reality were in themselves only semi-real. The Soviet Union was itself just a gigantic art installation, for its reality was shaped according to purely ideological, if you like, artistic criteria. And people neither wanted nor were able to distinguish at all clearly between reality and imagination. Even the political opposition, which also operated within the same invention of utopian, ideological circumstances, developed fictional — even fantastic — traits. If you want to escape a set of fictional circumstances you have no choice other than to sign up to a different fiction, invent more narratives and tell others about these, just as Kabakov does in his installations.

Of course it is true that since the mid-1960s at least, artistic projects, performances and actions all over the world have been documented in the form of installations, and, thanks to that documentation, have been presented in exhibition spaces and art museums alike. These installations always have a story to tell — the story of the realisation of the project or action in question. And pictures painted in the traditional

Огнем культурной борьбы.

manner, art objects, photographs and videos can all be used in the context of these installations. However, the pictures and objects used in this way do lose their traditional status as works of art. Instead they become documents, illustrating the story being told by means of the installation. It would be fair to say that nowadays the exhibition visitor is increasingly confronted with narrative installations that inform him or her about particular art projects, without presenting the works of art as finished products. Now, these installations generally presuppose that the art events they document really did happen at some point — even if they are not immediately present and could only be documented. Kabakov, by contrast, uses his albums and installations to tell fictional stories about fictional events that are not even clearly identifiable as art events or otherwise. It is more a case of their becoming art events solely through the ‘story’. And these stories are, of course, always utopian narratives.

Utopia, as it is used here, is not just some ‘fictitious’ place somewhere beyond the ‘real’ topography of this world. More than that, it is neither located within reality nor fiction, and the protagonist searching for a utopia specifically does not know if his aims — and hence his entire praxis — are real or a figment of his imagination. Utopia may perhaps be a fiction, but it is the kind of fiction that should be realised — in that sense it has a certain reality because the praxis of its realisation is real. But, by the same token, if a real praxis is subsumed within a fiction, then that

praxis will also take on fictional traits — and become pure narrative. So the protagonist in a utopian scenario cannot say with certainty whether he is truly alive or whether he only exists in his own — or someone else’s — imagination. Thus the hero of a utopia has a utopian body, and one cannot know what its possible, later disappearance could mean. It could mean the hero’s death, or his definite flight into the realms of the imagination. And the narrative that tells the story of a utopian hero is similarly ambiguous, because it is impossible to say whether the utopia in question is only being described or is actually being created.

But art itself — and art above all — is regarded by some as just such a utopian praxis. For art is a thoroughly real-life praxis where the aim is to realise fictions and describe their realisation — and specifically to realise and describe precisely those fictions which give no clue as to whether they can be realised at all or will remain fictions forever. In the context of the Western art market, the conditions of capitalism in effect veil this utopian dimension of art because its connections to the market make it look for all the world like a pragmatic activity firmly rooted in reality. But in the Soviet Union, where Kabakov originally developed his art, there was no mistaking the utopian nature of art as an activity. Which is why Kabakov responds to the postmodern discourse surrounding the death of the author by creating fictional, or rather, utopian authors who could be mortal or not. We just don’t know. All the heroes that feature in his albums and installations are just such utopian authors — utopian artists who have

so closely identified their real lives with their utopian projects that one could say that they no longer exist outside of their projects. The lives of these artists can only come to an end when their projects come to an end. And their projects are utopian because they have no concrete goal within reality, but set their sights on all that is open, uncertain, inconclusive, placeless — ultimately endless. So the heroes in Kabakov's installations are utopian, not just fictional, figures. And as such they are both like and unlike Kabakov himself, for the artist sees himself as just one figure amongst his many *doppelgängers* and artist-heroes.¹⁰ And the most important thing for Kabakov is that as soon as a person — artist or not — signs up to a utopia, that utopia is realised and that person has arrived in their utopia. There is no difference between waiting for a utopia and the final realisation of that utopia. Even the act of waiting for a utopia is intrinsically utopian because this waiting already has the capacity to change the reality of the person who is waiting.

This in itself is also a basic premise of Soviet ideology. The Soviet utopia is so amenable to appropriation because it always did see itself as an already complete, realised utopia. According to Soviet ideology the period of the construction of communism is fundamentally no different from fully-fledged communism. The real problem with Stalinist socialism was the claim that in the Soviet Union the class struggle had already reached its historical conclusion — that the people had already been liberated from the hell of exploitation and war. Thus the conditions that in reality prevailed in the

Soviet Union were deemed to be no different to the ideal conditions following the final victory of good over evil. The real place that the socialist camp had chosen for the construction of its utopia was proclaimed as the locus of the realised utopia. It doesn't take — nor did it ever take — much critical effort to observe that this claim was contra-factual, that the official idyll was the outcome of official manipulation, that the struggle still continued, be it a struggle for one's own survival, be it a struggle against repression and manipulation, be it a state of permanent revolution.

And yet the famous words 'it is finished' are just as impossible to dismiss merely by pointing to factual injustices and inadequacies than the no-less famous dictums 'Athman is Brahman' and 'Sansara is Nirvana'. This in itself takes us into the realms of the hidden congruence of anti-utopia and utopia, hell and paradise, damnation and redemption. We witness an event knowing that in its incomparably radical nature it could at most be repeated but could never be surpassed. It could be the picture of Jesus Christ on the cross, of Buddha under the tree, or, in Hegel's case, Napoleon on horseback. But it could also be the experience of Stalinism — with the state taking ultimate control of daily life, the total socialisation of every individual and, as such, an extreme realisation of a certain possibility of world history that could never be eclipsed. There is nothing easier than saying 'the struggle goes on' — because this is self-evidently the common-sense truth. What is rather more difficult to see is the fact that the combatants are not actively engaged in the

struggle; they have merely rigidified in the pose of combatants.

Kabakov's installation about the man who flew out into the cosmos basically conveys the same message: it is finished. The flight was successful; our hero's body has disappeared. Admittedly, this does not answer the question as to whether he has flown off into cosmic weightlessness or has plunged to his death. And this is actually the question — as to what it means when people say a story has come to an end, that a project is finished, or has been completed. The figure of the hero of any such project is always in part fictitious — he merely embodies a role that can be played again and again. And, by the same token, the story of the realisation of a project can be told time after time. Since every story, every authorship and every art is ultimately utopian, ie. semi-real and semi-fictional, there can be no certainty as to what actually took place — ultimately the protagonists are either alive or dead. Beyond that one can only assume or presume, tell more stories and make more installations documenting these narratives and suppositions. Whatever the case, it is certainly easier to disappear from reality than to be released from utopia.

- 1 The work was first shown in the exhibition 'Ten Characters', Feldman Fine Arts, New York, 1988.
- 2 Boris Groys, 'Kunstwerk als nichtfunktionelle Maschine', in Jürgen Harten (ed.), *Vladimir Tatlin. Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, Cologne: Stern, 1993, pp.252–27.
- 3 Nikolai Fedorov, *What Was Man Created For? The Philosophy of the Common Task. Selected Works*, translated from Russian and abridged by Elisabeth Koutaïssoff and Marilyn Minto, London: Lausanne, 1990.
- 4 Nikolai Fedorov, 'Muzei, ego smysl I znachenie', *Filosofia obshchego dela*, Paris: L'Age d'Homme, 1985, p.398.
- 5 Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*, New York: Picador, 2003, p.241.
- 6 Michel Foucault, 'Des Espace Autres', published by the French journal *Architecture-Mouvement-Continuité*, October 1984, was the basis of a lecture given by Foucault in March 1967.
- 7 'Deklarativnaja resoliutsija', *Kreatorij Rossijskikh i Moskovskikh Anarchistov-Biokosmistov*, no.1, Moscow, 1922, p.1.
- 8 Alexander Svyatogor, 'Doktrina otsov' i anarkhizm-biokomizm', *Biokosmist*, nos.3–4, Moscow, 1922, pp.17–18.
- 9 Orhan Pamuk, *My Name is Red*, New York: Vintage, 2004, pp.109–10.
- 10 A fictional artist 'Ilya Kabakov' – his (fictional) biography and (fictional) body of work – is presented by Kabakov himself in Bjørn Egging and Thomas Kellein (eds.), *Ilya/Emilia Kabakov. An Alternative History of Art* (exh. cat.), Cleveland: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005.

pp.10–11

Vladimir Tatlin

LeTatlin, 1932

Image courtesy the Zeppelin Museum,

Friedrichshafen

Photograph by Myrzik +

Jarisch Photography

pp.26–29

Ilya Kabakov

From the album *The Flying Kormorov*,
1972

Images courtesy of Ilya and Emilia

Kabakov and Centre George Pompidou,
Paris

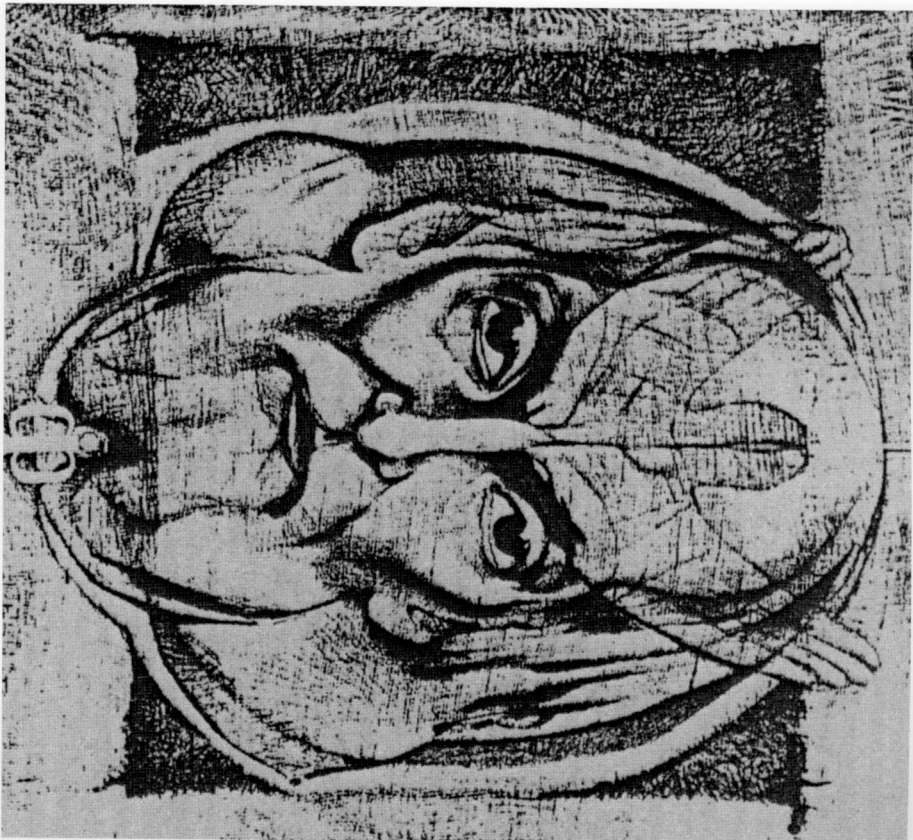
Photograph courtesy RMN

pp.34–35

Ilya Kabakov

From the album *Primakov-Sitting-in-
a-Closet*, 1972

Image courtesy Ilya and Emilia Kabakov



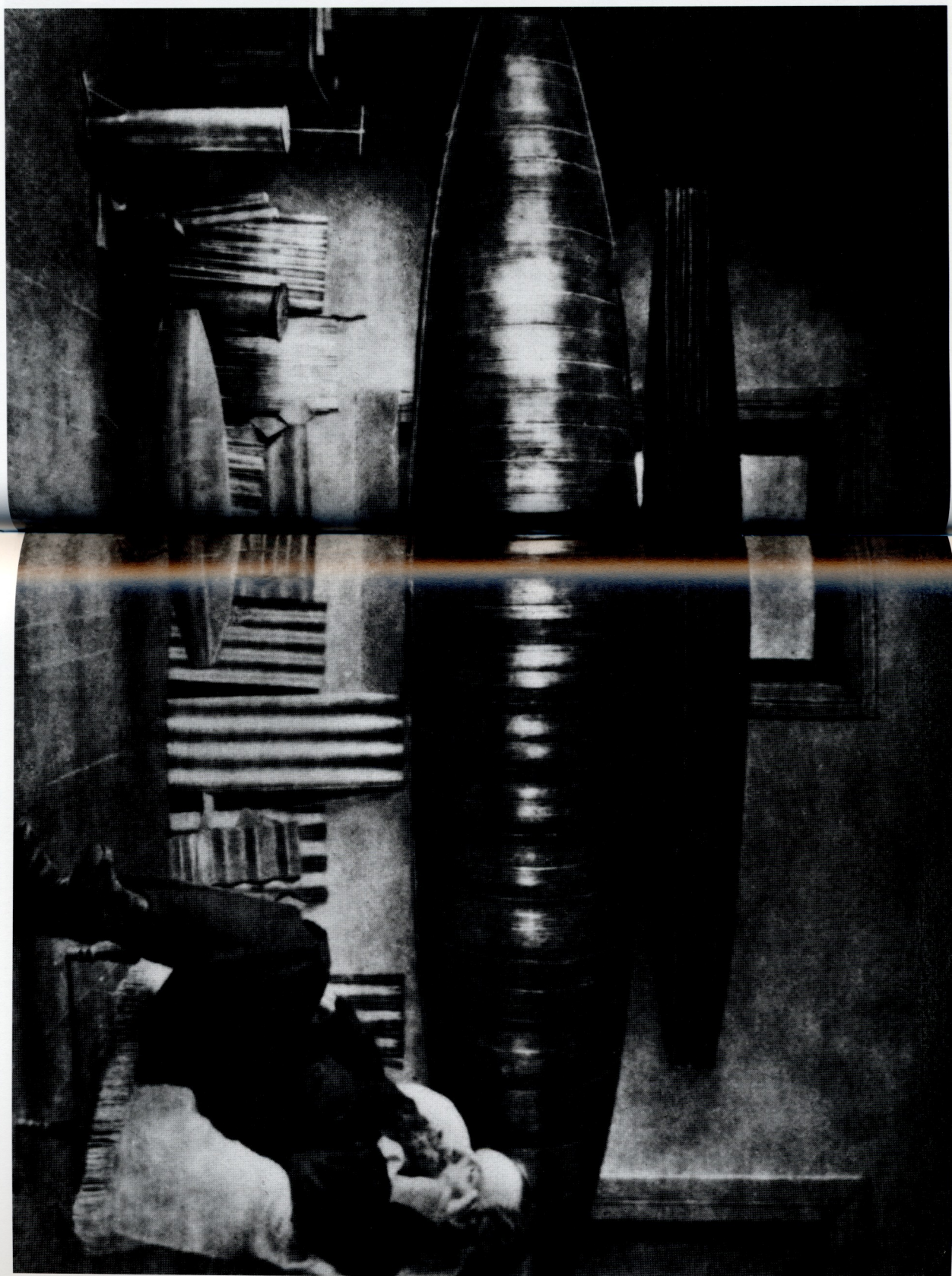
12. Otari Kandaurov, portrait
of Nikolai Fedorov, c.1980
Image courtesy Michael Hagemeister



13. Leonid Pasternak, portrait
of Nikolai Fedorov, Vladimir
Solov'yev, Lev Tolstoy, 1903
Image courtesy Michael Hagemeister



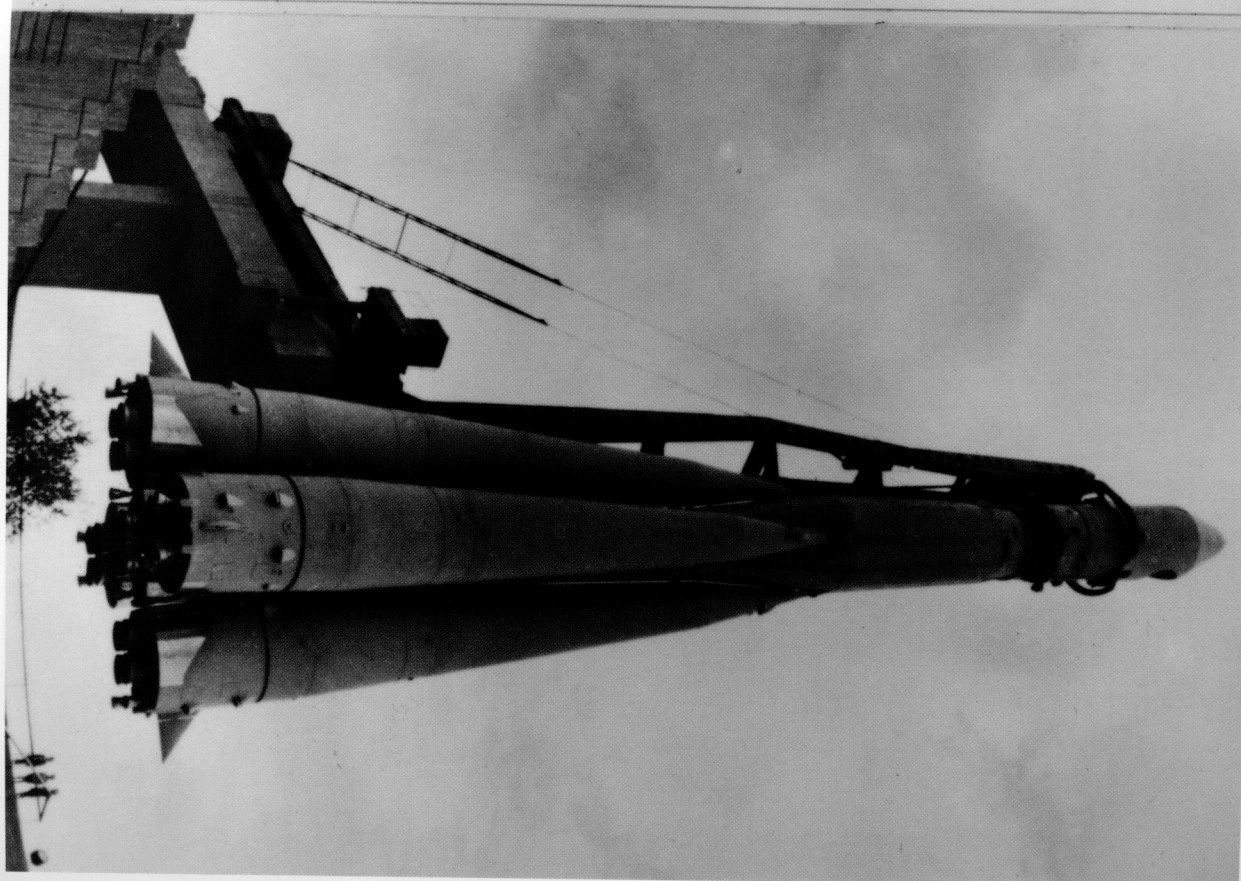
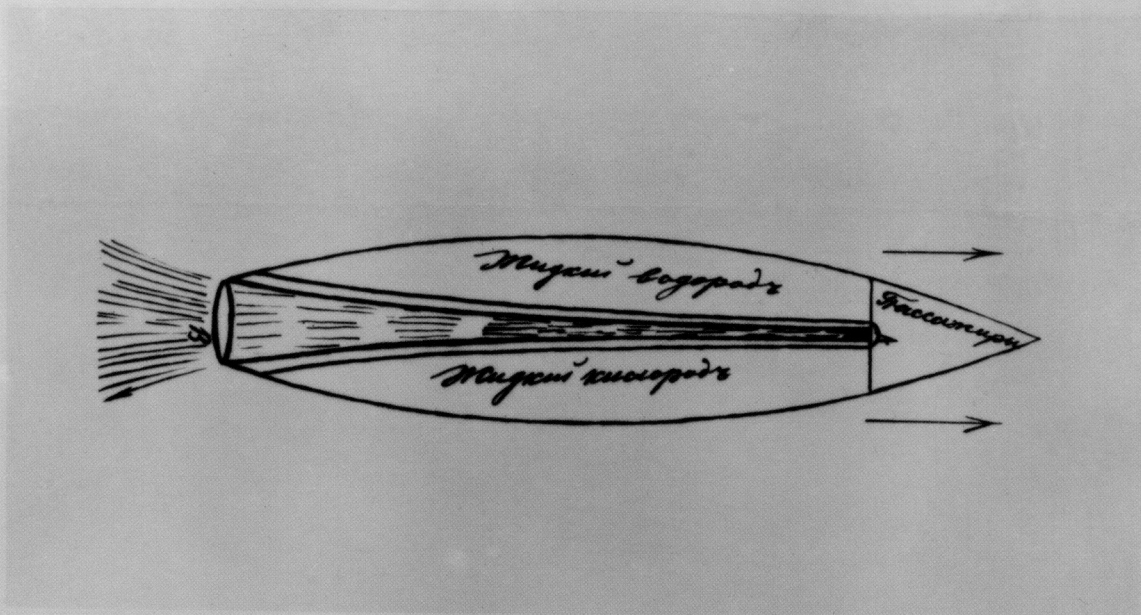
14. Portrait of Konstantin Tsiolkovsky
from book of postcards *Konstantin
Tsiolkovsky*, Moscow: Planeta, 1982



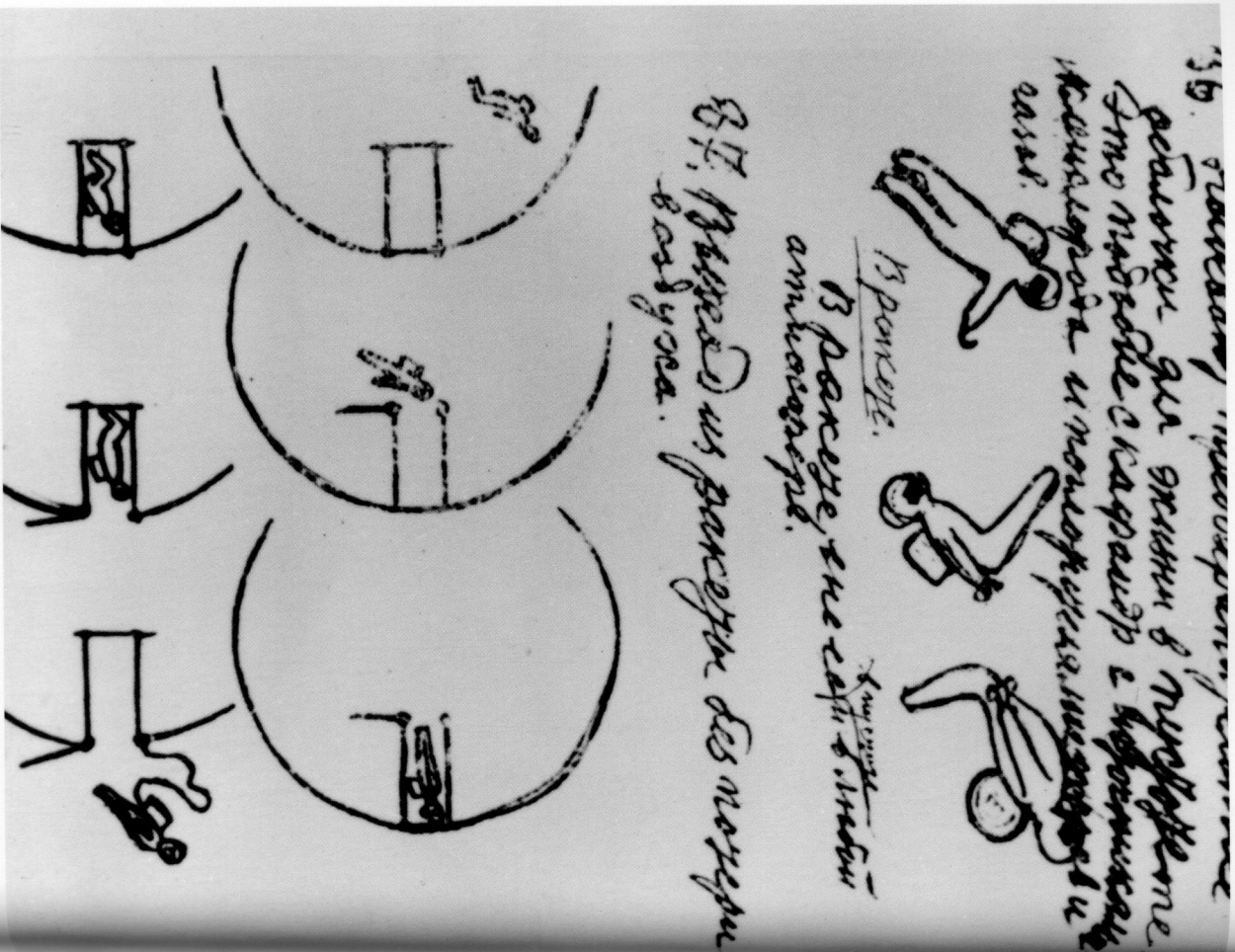
15. Tsiolkovsky in his Study (1930),
from book of postcards Konstantin
Tsiolkovsky



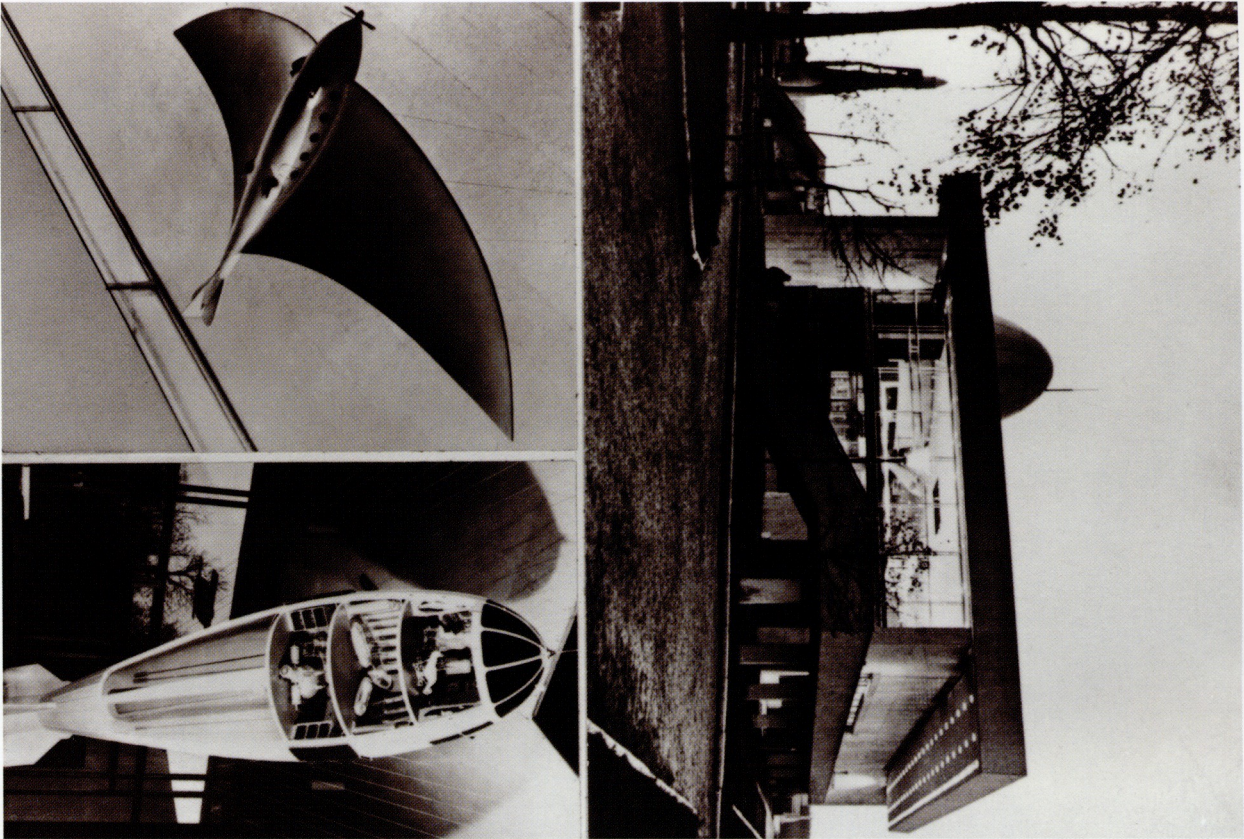
16. Tsiolkovsky with his wife
Varvara and his grandson Alyosha (1932),
from book of postcards *Konstantin
Tsiolkovsky*



17. Sketch and rocket (1903),
from book of postcards Konstantin
Tsiolkovsky



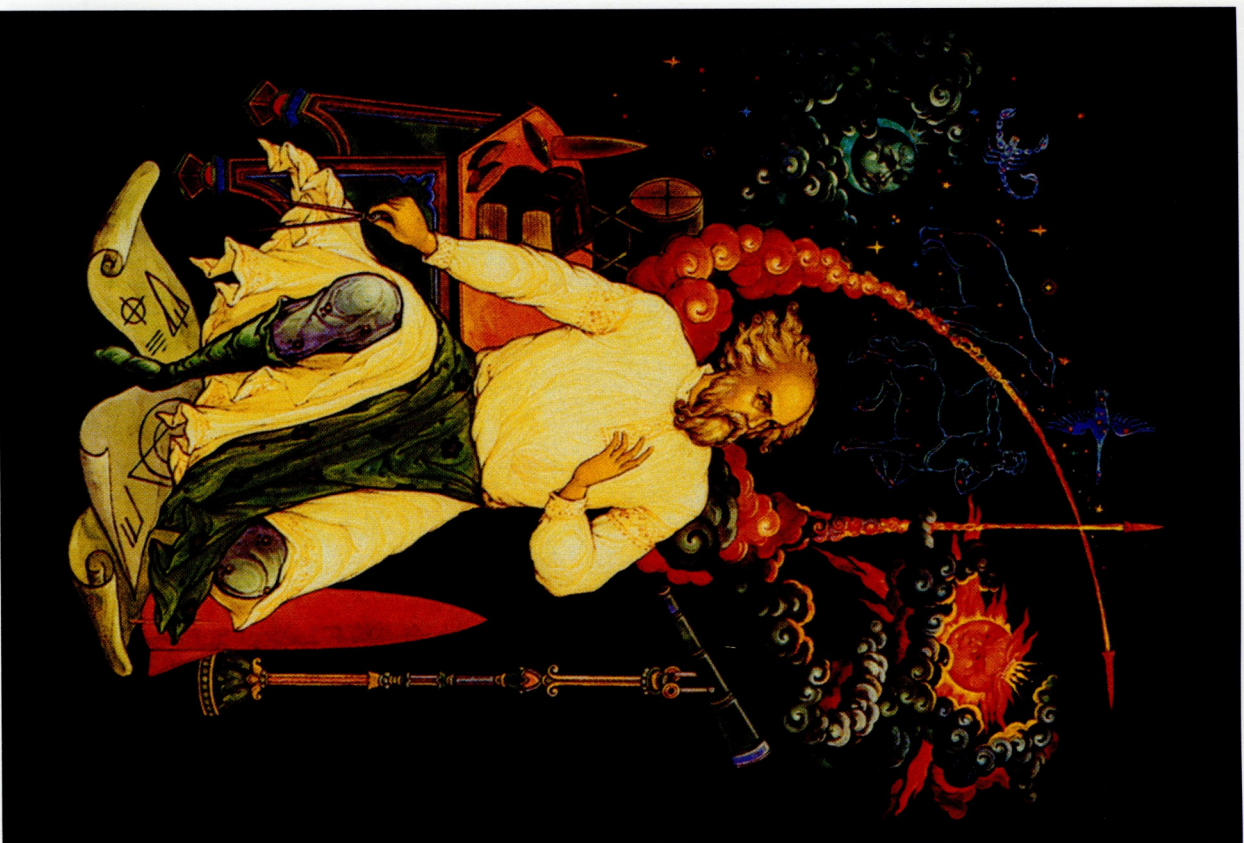
18. Sketches from Tsiolkovsky's
Album of Cosmic Travels (1933),
from book of postcards Konstantin
Tsiolkovsky



19. Konstantin E. Tsiolkovsky State
Museum of the History of Cosmonautics,
Kaluga, from book of postcards Konstantin
Tsiolkovsky



20. K.V. Kukuliyeva, B.N. Kukuliev
and O.V. An, portrait of Yuri Gagarin,
lacquer painting, from book of postcards
Syn Rossii (Son of Russia), Moscow:
Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, 1987



21. K.V. Kukulieva, B.N. Kukuliev and O.V. An, portrait of Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, lacquer painting, from book of postcards *Syn Rossii* (Son of Russia)



22. K.V. Kukulieva, B.N. Kukuliev and O.V. An, portrait of Yuri Gagarin and Sergei Korolyov, lacquer painting, from book of postcards *Syn Rossii* (Son of Russia)



23. K.V. Kukuliya, E.N. Kukuliev
and O.V. An, portrait of Yuri Gagarin,
lacquer painting, from book of postcards
Сын России (Son of Russia)